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ABSTRACT

Various explanations are explored for the alleged failure of social studies educators to redefine and restructure the high school social studies curriculum in light of indications at various periods throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries that changes were imminent. The author alleges that most reforms, including the 1916 Committee on the Social studies decree, failed to reform the social studies because they sought to merge content and social action without basically altering the social studies curriculum or changing the labels of the traditional disciplines. Historically, since the late 19th century, secondary level social studies has been a body of subject content and textbook material gleaned from social scientific and historical research and writings. For the most part, content has been based on history and political science and has consisted largely of descriptive material and non-controversial generalizations. The general pattern that developed was that high school students followed a curriculum based on one year of government or civics and two years of history (one of which was U.S. history). Findings from a review of historical trends indicates that there is a tendency for education to reflect the concerns that society directs toward schools. The conclusion is that there is a broad social perception that the basic structure of the social studies is just not in need of change, in spite of numerous and frequent demands for reform by social studies educators. One explanation offered for this acceptance of the status quo is that social studies already meets the public demand for an authoritative statement of subject matter. (DB)

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REFORMING THE SOCIAL STUDIES: AN EXPLORATION OF FAILURE.

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REFORMING THE SOCIAL STUDIES: AN EXPLORATION OF FAILURE

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Periodically, throughout the whole of this century there have been voiced the excited hopes of social studies educators of a new age in the field of social studies education. Each new dawning has led to expectations that, in looking back, were sadly unfulfilled. The social studies curriculum that came into existence early in this century has shown remarkable resiliency.[1] The views that have been offered in explanation of this tendency have suggested that it was due to a whole range of social, political, and economic concerns that were both internal and external to the school setting. There seems to be no adequate single explanation for the failure of social studies educators to redefine and to restructure the social studies curriculum.[2] In fact, the evidence might suggest that there has persisted a broad social perception that the basic structure of the social studies is just not in need of change. I believe that this perception has predominated even in those political entities within education, including the social studies field itself. I think one can logically infer this from that tendency that has existed in America for the basic concerns of the schools as social institutions to exist in a very high degree of synchrony with those concerns that the broader society directs toward schools. It is in this synchrony, however, that I believe we can see the one overarching explanatory factor in understanding why the social studies curriculum has remained so resistant to basic redefinition in this

century. All of the reform movements had in common that they were trying to redefine the social studies, and they all had in common that they failed to do so. I don't intend to catalogue all of these reform efforts here. They are too numerous and too complex in their variety to do justice in so short a presentation. Instead, I would like to explore what I see as the essence of the synchrony between societal and school concerns, and to suggest as a hypothesis how this essential characteristic of institutional change has thwarted recent efforts at reform of the social studies curriculum.

First, I do think that it is important that I set forth some delimitations and working definitions. I am going to explore the social studies curriculum as a secondary school phenomenon. Until the past few decades, elementary social studies has really lacked any kind of coherence. The social education that went on in the primary grades was more a product of the hidden and extra-curricular aspects of the school than any broad, planned goals. The myths and historical tidbits associated with holidays and other special events were probably the most significant sources of student knowledge during their early school years.

In addition, I am using as my definition of the social studies curriculum one that reflects what it has been, not necessarily what anyone has felt it should be. The social studies curriculum is merely an amorphous body of "subjectized content" and "Textualized material" gleaned somewhat systematically from social scientific and historical research and writings. The majority of this material has been from history and political science, and it has largely consisted of descriptive

material and the least controversial generalizations.

Another controversy I wish to skirt is -- what is curriculum? There have been suggested a myriad of definitions, none of which has consensual acceptance. As such, I have to make a somewhat arbitrary choice. For my purposes a relatively broad definition is needed. Most definitions share the idea that curriculum either directly includes, or has as a crucial corollary, both subject matter content and intellectual process. Combining these characteristics, I see curriculum as the planned, instructional goals of the school which are organized around subject matter. Of course, in defining the subject, one must recognize that there are intellectual processes that are at least more common to the particular subject areas, even if they are not unique. I hope, by the use of so broad a definition, to subsume the many conflicting views as to whether curriculum is a plan or a process; or whether it includes, or is distinct from modes of instruction. It is also necessary that I assume the curriculum, as I have defined it, is so integral to the educative institution that it is valid to treat it historically as one would any social institution.

Daniel Boorstin has suggested that the predominate model of historical analysis of social institutions in American historiography has been rooted in an organic perception of the nature of society. Within this organic model, there has also been a tendency to view institutional development along evolutionary lines.[3] The problem with this, however, is that it has led to an acceptance of linearization in the interpretation of institutional change. Concomitantly, histor-

ians have sought to identify the pressures toward change, or their antitheses, in some form of heirarchical fashion. I believe that this distorts the broader picture, because it tends to neglect the very complex interactions between the various sources of pressure that are inherent to complex social organizations. Therefore, to get at an understanding of these interactions as they themselves serve as forces in institutional change, some other analytical model is necessary.

Boorstin has offered that the organic analogy itslef is the source of the problem. He feels that what is needed is a kind of mechanistic model, one that is more appropriate to the technocratic structure that presently exists.[4] The rejection of this basic analogy, however, is not what I believe is needed. It remains a valid analytical model. What is needed is the rejection of the evolutionary idea that has become its adjunct. In its place, I would like to suggest that an appropriate model for examining institutional change is found in the idea of Durkheim that institutions are guided toward homeostasis.[5] This balance that comes to exist between all the interactive elements affecting the institution includes, of course, the idea of stability, but it can also exist without stability. It is possible that change itself could serve as a source of homeostasis. On the other hand, the appearance of stability can occur when an array of powerful pressures are acting equally upon an institution so as to cancel out one another, in turn merely disguising the very real lack of homeostasis that conflict may engender. Therefore, for historians to get at an understanding of an institution's homeostasis it is necessary that they first identify

what I would call the primary homeostatic factor. This factor has to be intellectual; and it has to be the integral social perception as to the ideational undergirding of the institution. No matter what the pressures or forces acting upon the institution, no matter whether the forces are complementary or contradictory, they must share a basic intellectual perception about the institution. The identification of this homeostatic factor can, I think, provide the historian with an instrument for understanding what often appear to be contradictory patterns in institutional change. When conflicting pressures seem to propel an institution toward a particular pattern of change (or in creating resistance to change), there can exist the appearance of contradiction. If we explore the linkage that each force has to the institution, however, we may find that there is at root a basic shared perception about the institution. I believe it is this shared perception, or homeostatic factor, that has to be altered before there can occur any profound change. (It has to be noted that I would define profound change in an institution as a basic redefinition of its function. Without this redefinition, there only occurs cosmetic change, or at best a reordering of the same set of priorities.)

I would liken this alteration of the homeostatic factor to the idea of the changed paradigm that Thomas Kuhn suggested in The Structure of Scientific Revolution. I certainly realize that I am stretching his principle, since he uses the concept to explain the shared perception that like-minded individuals (i.e. scientists) have toward the esoteric body of knowledge that they share as a group. I do think, however,

that in terms of certain knowledge a "group" can be as large as society as a whole. Shared perceptions, although they become decreasingly esoteric as the group grows, still exist when applied toward shared objects of concern, which is the case with any social institution.[6] Thus, I would like to suggest that we must look to a kind of paradigmatic shift, or lack thereof, to find the nature of a homeostatic factor in fostering institutional redefinition, or in the anthithesis of that, resisting profound institutional change.

How then do I see this homeostatic factor exerting an impact upon the social studies curriculum? First of all, in looking at the social studies curriculum as though it functions as does any social institution, I see its homeostasis based largely upon what can be termed quite loosely as the nature of knowledge. That is, there exists an integral shared perception held by those groups of internal and external pressures which act upon the curriculum in determining the content and processes of the social studies that reflects how, in a very nebulous sense, society perceives knowledge.

I believe that the primary homeostatic factor that has governed the social studies curriculum in this century had its roots in the intellectual ferment that surrounded schooling during the nineteenth century. In the years between 1850 and 1900 there occured a kind of paradigmatic shift which forced a broad revision of curriculum at all levels of schooling. The basis of this paradigmatic shift rested, I think, in what might best be termed a perception of knowledge as no longer an integrated whole. Knowledge, as some form of reachable state, had disintegrated into an incompre-

hensible array of dissimilar processes and content, while at the same time it was mushrooming into diverse directions. The idea that someone, a learned person, could in a lifetime master all that was known, persisted well past any point in time when such an occurance would have been physically possible.

It was this perception of a learned person that undergirded the whole perennialist tradition that dominated American education for most of the nineteenth century, at all levels except the most rudimentary. The intellectual in America was one who invariably was seen as belonging to a patrician culture, because only the wealthy were free to pursue the leisurely life of intellect. For this elite class there was a higher education. For the masses in an increasingly democratized America a higher education was superfluous, since the working class only needed practical education. The common school was not in any sense directed toward the wholesale creation of pursuers of a life of intellect. Such a life remained the province of those who the democratized working classes may have admired, but for whom there was little need or desire to emulate. As such, there was not very great support for a higher education among the working classes before the Civil War.[7] The general perception that seemed to exist about knowledge was that it was a kind of integrated entity that could be absorbed in wholely integrated portions at the various levels. Knowledge was also composed of timeless elements, appropriate to any age. Curriculum, therefore, reflected this kind of practical/perennialist dichotomy, which directed education toward quite diverse goals, but which also reflected a shared perception that knowledge was understandable and achieveable. During the first half of the nineteenth century, school curriculum at all levels taught practical skills; these

skills, however, were associated with, or ancillary to the knowledge component of the curriculum. Through the acquisition of integrated knowledge portions the moral education imperative of the schools was met. In teaching those bodies of content that were the antecedants of the modern social studies (e.g. history, government, and political economy), recitation of a text was virtually the sole method. Yet this fit so perfectly the social perception of knowledge. A text was achieved knowledge; and thus, a subject was not a vibrant discipline, but rather was an accumulation of facts that represented the ultimate achievement of the subject. In the decades that preceded this century, however, the social perception of knowledge as an integrated whole underwent radical alteration.

Many American historians have identified the last decades of the nineteenth century as a period of immense social and intellectual ferment. Whether the period was the watershed in American history as Commager argued, is debatable.[8] But certainly none reject the idea that schooling in America was integrally involved in that change, especially in the creation of mass higher education. This was evident both in the creation of increasing numbers of high schools and in growing enrollments at collegiate levels. The place of intellect in American society had changed. According to Hofsfadter, ". . . the claims of intellect were not based on the social position of the men who exemplified it, but on their usefulness in mobilizing and directing the restless, critical, reforming energies of the country. Intellect was reinstalled /in the public eye/ because of its service to change."[9] To Bledstein, the changes in education were in response to the rapid growth of an

American middle class. "With the creation of the university in America. . ., the middle class succeeded in establishing an institutional matrix for its evolving types of behavior. By and large the American university came into existence to serve and promote professional authority in society."[10] It is in this new association of intellect and professional authority that one finds the new nature of knowledge as perceived by the broader society. According to Bledstein, "Legitimate authority. . . resided in special words shared only by experts."[11] In this new order, it was the professional who "defined the unique quality of a subject, its special basis in an exclusive and independent circle of natural experiences."[12]

The profound changes that took place in education during this period around the turn of the century, reflected this new social perception about knowledge. It quite suddenly became very important to nearly everyone in education that a clearly deliniated heirarchical structure be established. The high school took shape as an intermediate institution. It became less and less common for skills to be thought of as terminal. The curriculum also became heirarchical, with subject matter becoming increasingly graded and subordinated, not to an integrated end, but to more complex levels of similar subject matter. There were suddenly two imperatives for the schools to meet.

The Common schools had been established to create a moral citizenry, one that abided by the rules of moral conduct as put forth by a free protestant society. This purpose for the school remained, despite changes in the perception of knowledge. This first imperative, however, was less and less tied to specific knowledge. This idea was rooted in a perennialist

curriculum, not the new essentialist organization that the new perception of knowledge demanded. As such, citizen became increasingly defined in terms of specific knowledge, as in government and history. While citizenship, as a concept, became increasingly vague, defined largely in terms of conformity to local norms. Because of this, the schools became increasingly characterized by a curricular/extracurricular dichotomy, with the traditional moral citizen imperative carried out by the extra-curriculum and the curriculum directed toward fulfilling the new imperative of providing specialized knowledge. It was during the turmoil of this restructuring of American schools that the social studies took shape.

The subject matter antecedants to what became the social studies had existed in American schools throughout the nineteenth century. Civil Government and Constitution was a common course of study at colleges and preparatory schools as early as the 1830's. It was not, however, as common as some facet of ancient history and geography. At most colleges, Civil Government and Constitution was taught by the minister/president through sweeping sermon/lectures that emphasized moral commitment. And in an age when recitation was the standard of instruction, subject matter such as Civil Government or General History had few recitation periods. Also, where a text was required, it was generally the exact text that had been required at the president's alma mater. This, of course, was typical of curriculum in all of American collegiate education. The content of curriculum was important only in its training capabilities, and the curriculum of established colleges had proven itself, so new schools, or schools with new presidents merely copied a familiar, older example.

Certainly the pattern in preparatory and high schools was not the same as in colleges. The mastery, or memorization of subject matter in government and history was more important than in colleges, but only so much as it demonstrated the trainability of the student, which was largely what the colleges examined in a prospective student. In the decades just preceeding the turn of the century, however, content took on increasing importance.

During the 1880's and 1890's a real schizm began to develop between secondary schools and colleges. Increasingly, the entrance examination became more rigorous. Students who failed had to spend far longer in the college prep departments. In the west, admission by certificate became quite popular. This procedure, which had the college approving the high school curriculum, stressed subject matter. The great issue in education during the 1890's was articulation of high school and college, an articulation of the subject matter of the two levels. But there was no real resolution of this issue. In large part it was because the colleges themselves had no curricular stability. At that level, the disintegration of knowledge into diverse directions far out-paced the ability of preparatory institutions to keep up. The secondary schools were traped in the new social perception; they had to prepare students in specialized knowledge, but only in that which was most established (i.e. "facts," one of the most popular terms in educational literature early in this century), and in that which was most general. This was what the social studies curriculum did. The general pattern that developed had the typical student taking at the high school level, a year of government or civics, and two years of history, one being United States history. The content was oriented toward fact and

the least controversial generalizations. And it was in response to this curriculum that social studies educators sought to redefine the field.

I would hypothesize that social studies reformers who have sought the reorientation of our field were first struck by the illogic of this predominate curricular/extracurricular and citizen/citizenship dichotomy. The specialized knowledge that the broader social perception had come to associate with the schools' efforts at educating the citizen was largely factual knowledge about American government and history. It had very little to do with the behaviors that were associated with citizenship. Social studies reformers sought to merge these elements. They sought a body of content that did have logical connection to the behaviors of citizenship. The 1916 committee on The Social Studies was a good example of this effort. As they noted: "The committee adheres to the view that it was appointed, not to 'obtain justice' for a group of social studies as against other groups, or for one social study as against others, but to consider when in such studies might be made to contribute most effectively to the purposes of secondary education."[13] I think this is what Beard meant by the "seamless web" -- a movement, clear and smooth, from content to social action. [14] Nearly all reform, whether by those who were progressive, social reconstructionist, or even of those who may have remained weded to an essentialist view of curriculum, sought to merge content and social action. They also had in common basic failure. The social studies curriculum remained without basic alteration just as it had begun the century.

One point, I think, needs reiteration. The broad social perception of the nature of knowledge was certainly not characterized by intellectual

depth. More than anything else, it was characterized by a vague, very nebulous image of correctness in the nature of things. Society was dependent upon professional expertise to provide the clear, simple truths of specialized knowledge. As Bledstein noted: "The jurisdictional claim /of the authority of the professional/ derived from a special power over worldly experience, a command over the profundities of a discipline."[15] All that society needed to accept was that content needed disciplinary bounds. This they accepted without question, as did most social studies educators. For that matter, so did social studies reformers. The conflict that most never resolved was how to subjectize new content for the social studies without using the labels of the traditional disciplines. If they did do this, then the broader social perception and that of the profession, saw it as unconnected to the disciplines, and without appropriate authority, thus making the reform unacceptable. If they tried to maintain connection to the traditional disciplines, then their reforms were viewed as cosmetic. In either event, the social studies reformers could pursuade neither the external political entities, nor the internal entities that theirs was appropriate reform.

Using this hypothesis that I have presented, I would like to look very briefly at the reform movements of the past twenty-five years. The reforms in social studies that have recently been proffered differed from earlier efforts largely in that they seemed to have a vastly more receptive audience. It was a time in American education when the whole society seemed to be focusing upon the curriculum. This was the era of the new social studies, but unfortunately there was not a single "new social studies." As John Haas has noted, by the middle of the 1960's "there existed a main-

stream social studies curriculum, two distinct reform rationales, and a potpourri of quasi-reforms."[16] I would like to look at the two distinct reform rationales, though I will not analyze them in anywhere near the depth of Haas.

Although they evolved parallel to one another, I think the first of these had its beginning in the modern era with the work of Hunt and Metcalf. What made this the first of the reform rationales, was that its roots went clearly back to the earlier reform efforts in social studies education. As have most of the movements of this century, they borrowed heavily from Dewey. They proposed an idea for curriculum that assumed the merger of the citizen-knowledge/citizenship-action dichotomy through the creation of a citizen as a reflective inquirer. As to content, they clearly sought an end to the traditional curricular organization. In their words: "It is now felt that the attempt to maintain separate fields of inquiry is sometimes artificial and a handicap to vital research. There is a growing tendency to believe that the centers of organization of the social sciences should be, not the traditional disciplines, but broad problem areas, ..."[17] They therefore suggested that "Although a fundamental overhauling of the content of the social studies has not been tried on a widespread scale in this country, the present book assumes that <u>to some degree</u> such an overhauling is possible. It also assumes that an overhauling is desirable in any situation where a teacher knows what he is doing and where there is enough acceptance of the move so that general opposition will not develop."[18] Unfortunately, too few teachers either cared to overhaul the content or felt secure in their knowing how; or, there was too much general opposition. Others who pushed a similar rationale (Engle, Oliver, Shaver,

and Newman among them) also had only minimal success. Efforts to produce nondiscipline bound materials led to only minimal consumption. I think that it is rather clear that this rationale merely ran counter to the social perception about the nature of content. For that other rationale, however, it isn't quite so clear.

If there was one reform movement that should have had a massive acceptance (if my hypothesis is to hold) it would have to be the structure of the disciplines approach that grew out of the work of Bruner and his colleagues. Here was a movement that clearly took the position that the 'citizen as knowledgeable" imperative of the schools was appropriate. And they clearly called for a curricular organization that fitted the broad social perception. Why then did it fail to redefine the social studies? Even with the severe criticism within the social studies that this aspect of the New Social Studies received, if society had wanted the curriculum changed in that fashion, it would have been. The broader society certainly managed to keep alive the traditional social studies curriculum in the face of opposition within the field. The answer, I believe, rests in a basic dissonance between this structure of the disciplines approach and the social perception of knowledge.

A very negative aspect of the "culture of professionalism" that Bledstein has noted about our society is that "regard for professional expertise compelled people to believe the voices of authority unquestioningly, thereby undermining self-confidence and discouraging independent evaluation."[19] In short, the public demands an authoritative statement of subject matter content. The structure of the disciplines format would not do this. The encouragement of hypothesizing <u>was not</u> teaching. It was not accepted as such

by society at large, and it was not really accepted by most social studies teachers. As a radical restructuring of the social studies field, the New Social Studies were doomed by the same factor that halted earlier reform efforts, - the homeostatic factor that maintains the synchrony between the functioning of the schools as they have traditionally done so, and the concerns of society for the schools.

I recognize that this paper is far too speculative and that it contains far too many sweeping generalizations. I hope, however, that it will assist in focusing thought about the history of the social studies curriculum toward finding some principles of institutional change that will help us see where we persist in going wrong.

[1]A very recent documentation of this point is found in Douglas P. Superka, Sharryl Hawke, and Irving Morrissett, "The Current and Future Status of the Social Studies," Social Education, Volume 44, Number 5 (May, 1980) p. 362-369.

[2]See John P. Haas, The Era of the New Social Studies (Boulder, Colo.: Social Science Education Consortium, 1977).

[3]Daniel Boorstin, "The Tyranny of Darwin," The Townsend Memorial Lecture, Oklahoma State University, April 7, 1980.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Robert Arnove, "On Sociological Perspective and Educational Problems," in Elizabeth Steiner, Robert Arnove, and B. Edward McClellan, Education and American Culture (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co.,1980) p. 8. Within sociological theory this view is largely associated with the structural functionalists, most notably Talcott Parsons and C. Wright Mills. It should be noted, however, that the popular alternative to the structural functionalists, conflict theory, does not reject their assumptions about the nature of a society, only the nature of social relationships in a society. See Daniel Selakovich, "Studying Schools: Social Theory," (unpublished manuscript of work in progress, Oklahoma State University, 1980) p. 9.

[6]I don't wish to suggest a functionalist bias by this view of social institutions. Certainly there is no unanimity as to perception that any society holds toward its institutions. There is, however, a level at which there is some degree of consensus among a majority of those with the power to affect change in the institution. One can assume that in participatory societies this would include a broad spectrum of the population; and even where direct access to power may be denied (e.g. for women during most of history) there can still be exerted subtle pressures. In authoritarian societies change may occur more readily if it is desired by those with the greatest power, but even in these cases the generally powerless broader society can exert immense pressure given sufficient time.

[7]See Michael Katz, The Irony of Early School Reform: Educational Innovation in Mid-Nineteenth Century Massachusetts (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968).

[8]Henry Steele Commager, The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Thought Since the 1880's (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1950).

[9]Richard Hofstadter, Anti-Intellectualism in American Life (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963) p. 198.

[10]Burton Bledstein, The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America (New York: Norton, 1976) p.x.

[11]Ibid., p.78.

[12]Ibid., p.88.

[13]"Report of the Committee on Social Studies of the Commission on the Re-organization of Secondary Schools of the National Education Association," The History Teacher's Magaxine, Volume VIII (January, 1917) p. 4.

[14]Charles A. Beard, A Charter for the Social Sciences, Report of the Commission on Social Studies of the American Historical Association (New York: Scribner's, 1932) p. 1.

[15]Bledstein, Culture of Professionalism, p. 90.

[16]Haas, New Social Studies, p.54.

[17]Maurice P. Hunt and Lawrence E. Metcalf, Teaching High School Social Studies: Problems in Reflective Thinking and Social Understanding (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1955) p.193.

[18]Ibid., p.210.

[19]Bledstein, Culture of Professionalism, p.xi.